

# Department of Human Services

Prepared by the  
DHS Office of  
Communications  
(517) 373-7394



## Articles in Today's Clips Monday, March 10, 2008

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## State auditor rates DHS' performance

3/8/2008, 4:07 p.m. ET

**The Associated Press**

LANSING, Mich. (AP) — A report from the state auditor says the Department of Human Services is costing the state millions in misspent aid.

The department is responsible for overseeing who is eligible to receive cash, food assistance, child care and Medicaid. The audit said the DHS was "moderately effective in its oversight" as it failed to catch or correct errors from October 2002 through November 2006.

Among its 10 recommendations, auditors say the department needs to analyze its workload for its caseworkers and expedite its application process to meet federal standards.

The DHS, which has about 2,900 caseworkers in 110 offices throughout the state, disagreed with only one of the recommendations.

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On the Net:

Michigan Auditor General: <http://audgen.michigan.gov/>

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March 7, 2008

## **AUDIT: D.H.S. INEFFICIENT IN WELFARE PAYMENTS, COSTING STATE MILLIONS**

Mostly due to an overworked and undertrained staff, along with a seriously restricted budget, the Department of Human Services is struggling to accurately and timely identify who is qualified to receive assistance, costing the state millions in misspent assistance dollars and millions more in potential federal sanctions and lost incentives, said a [report](#) from Auditor General Thomas McTavish released on Friday.

DHS, which is responsible for determining eligibility for cash, food assistance, childcare and Medicaid cases, didn't effectively catch or fix errors in determination in the four years reviewed by the audit, from October 2002 through November 2006, the audit said.

Among the chief finds of auditors was that DHS mistakenly sent out payments in fiscal year 2006-06 in 7.5 percent of cases, which the report attributed to ever increasing caseloads from workers. The higher workload, along with complicated policy instructions and poor use of existing technology caused staff to overlook some of the required verifications in order to complete their case evaluations within the 30-days allowed by the federal government, the report said.

Although DHS has made strides in its system, and in fact saved more than \$18 million over three years by lowering the amount of assistance given out to those who don't qualify, the error rate in Michigan in 2005-06 was still 1.5 percent higher than the federal government tolerates, opening the state to economic sanctions much like the \$89 million the federal government initiated for the fiscal years 1995-02.

Not only is Michigan inaccurate in its approvals but it's slow, too, the report said.

Michigan ranks 45th in its turnaround time with 81 percent of clients receiving approvals within the 30 days required by the federal government. That compares to Massachusetts, which ranked first and informs nearly 99 percent of its clients about their case status within a month.

Getting such a bad ranking means Michigan loses out on a \$1 million incentive from the federal government each year that it doesn't rank among the top six states for its approval speed.

Auditors said that the first order of business for DHS to speed things up is to align its procedures for determining how quickly it processes applications with federal government standards.

That means taking the denied cases out of the monthly report that informs staff of how quickly they are turning cases around so workers are aware of their relatively slow performance, which looks 16 percent faster when denials are included.

DHS said it has sent memos educating staff about which cases to include in the monthly report in order to correct inconsistencies with federal policies. It added that the Bridges computer program should solve any remaining questions about which cases to include because it will be set up to only enter approvals.

Although DHS was also cited for not regularly reviewing each field office's performance, the department said that it started quarterly reviews after auditors completed their review.

In order to progress further, DHS said, it needs more "resources, " because, although officials agreed with many of the audit's suggestions, they can't comply with them without more funds.

Among the fixes the department said it would initiate with more money is a study of how many workers it needs to handle caseloads and what tasks could be done by other staff members to increase worker availability for clients.

With more than 75 percent of workers and 87 percent of managers reporting that caseloads are too high, the study will likely find that more staff is needed, but the department said it can't hire more workers without additional funding.



## 'Protectors' failed Nicholas Braman

Sunday, March 09, 2008

T&lt;2009&gt;&lt;2009&gt;HE Murder of

Nicholas Braman is tragic.

The inaction of the state agency charged with safeguarding his little 9-year-old life is appalling.

And the response of that agency upon learning of its screwup is galling.

Nicholas, his father, Oliver, and stepmother, Nancy Kaczor-Braman -- a former Bridgeport resident -- committed suicide in October in their home in Stanton, about 20 miles southwest of Alma in Montcalm County. They all had taken pain pills, and Oliver Braman pumped carbon monoxide into the house from his truck. Obviously a 9-year-old isn't capable of deciding to commit suicide. That means his father and stepmother killed him.

"More could and should have been done to protect Nicholas Braman," the state Department of Human Services said in a recent report of itself.

Do you think? In September, Oliver Braman admitted in court he had used an electric cattle prod on his 14- and 15-year-old sons last August.

This came after the Saginaw County Department of Human Services verified child abuse clat Braman in 2004 and the kids moved into the Saginaw home of their mother, Rebecca Jasinski.

But Saginaw County officials didn't make sure Jasinski -- she and Braman divorced in 1999 -- got legal custody, and the children wound up back with their abusive father.

After the cattle-prodding, the two older boys ran away to Saginaw. Nicholas remained with Braman. Right about then the county's Department of Human Services got word of the torture.

Here's what our county agency did: Nothing.

The state report said Saginaw County Human Services should've gone to court to protect Nicholas because it knew about the past abuse and how severe it was.

Here's what County Department of Human Services Director Randy Barst said about the report: Nothing. He passed the buck to Maureen Sorbet, the state agency's communications director in Lansing.

Here's what Sorbet said: Nothing.

And check out the report itself: "... it is important to remember that despite the best efforts of agencies like ours, tragedies will occur." Like death.

Meanwhile, a different Michigan Office of Children's Ombudsman report said Saginaw County Children's Protective Services -- a part of Human Services -- was wrong when it didn't call the cattle-prodded boys torture victims. If it had, it could've ended Braman's parental rights.

Here's what Human Services said: Torture is a legal standard, but it's not defined in child protection law.

Get that? If it looks like torture, sounds like torture and feels like torture it's ... not torture? Come on.

What a bungled, lethal mess. And what arrogant reactions to it.

Sure, the Human Services report recommended administrative changes, performance reviews, better oversight and such. And Montcalm County got its share of criticism too.

But another kid is dead -- remember Ricky Holland? -- because of a wacko parent and the miserable failures of the adults assigned to protect the defenseless child.

The report's author promises that Nicholas' death will affect how the agency handles cases now and in the future.

We can only hope.

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# Boy testifies of abuse at hands of former teacher

BY L.L. BRASIER • FREE PRESS STAFF WRITER • March 10, 2008

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An eight year old Chicago boy took the witness stand in the trial of a former Oak Park teacher, and insisted the teacher dragged him into an empty special room and forced oral sex on him.

## ADVERTISEMENT

“He put his privacy in my mouth,” the child said in an almost inaudible voice in Oakland County Circuit Court.. “He put his penis in my butt.”

The child, whose name is being withheld by the Free Press, testified against James Perry, 34, charged with four counts of criminal sexual conduct. Perry is accused of dragging the boy, then aged 5, and another boy 4, from a supervised lunch line at Key Elementary School in October, 2005, and assaulting them.

The eight year old, the first to testify in Perry’s trial, was sleepy on the witness stand, and told conflicting accounts of what happened. In earlier statements, he insisted he and the four year old were assaulted at the same time. In this morning’s testimony, he said he was alone.

In statements he first made to investigators, he said the four year old was “teabagged” by Perry, a street term referring to a form of oral sex. But this morning, he said he had no knowledge of the term and did not know what it meant.

Defense attorney Mitchell Ribitwer questioned the child extensively about the contradictions and at one point stopped because the boy had fallen asleep on the witness stand. The judge prodded him to sit up.

“Does that mean some of the things you told were lies,” Ribitwer asked?

“I don’t remember,” the boy said, yawning.

This is Perry’s second trial. He was convicted of the charges in September 2005, but judge Denise Langford Morris threw the conviction out after learning that police never interviewed the three adults assigned to the special ed room where the assaults allegedly took place.

All three are expected to testify that the room was always occupied during the day by children and adults and that the assaults could not have happened there.

Testimony is expected to continue this afternoon. The trial is expected to take three weeks to a month.

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## Abuse prevention program requires commitment

Saturday, March 08, 2008

**By Charles Honey**

Press Religion Editor

GRAND RAPIDS -- It takes a lot of record-keeping and time, but the Grand Rapids Catholic Diocese's Child and Youth Protection abuse-prevention program is well worth it, the Rev. Mark Przybysz says.

"We were all taught as kids not to take candy from strangers or get in a car with somebody," said Przybysz, pastor of St. Anthony of Padua Catholic Church in Grand Rapids. "This is just a reinforcement of that and going to a new level."

The 11-county diocese spent \$66,000 on the program last year, up from \$48,500 in 2006, according to a national report released Friday.

The diocese spent another \$37,500 on counseling for sexual-abuse survivors, down from \$48,500 in 2006.

The annual review by U.S. Catholic bishops also found the Grand Rapids Diocese received four new sexual-abuse allegations against three former priests last year.

### Already removed

The accused priests previously were removed from ministry, and the allegations are of incidents between 35 and 50 years ago, said Mary Haarman, diocesan spokeswoman.

They include Michael McKenna, who was removed in 2006; Louis Baudone, removed in 1993; and Stanislaus Bur, who once served in Grand Rapids but was removed by the Saginaw Diocese. Bishop Walter Hurley removed McKenna for credible allegations he had abused more than one boy in the 1970s. The allegations against Baudone date from the early 1970s and against Bur from the 1950s, Haarman said.

### Additional resources

Friday's report shows the diocese continued to increase spending on its safe-environment programs, which include background checks on any employees or volunteers who come in contact with children in churches and schools. About 8,000 people have gone through the program, Haarman said.

Monsignor William Duncan, who oversees the program, said there continues to be an increasing commitment in strengthening the program.

"We see ourselves as one resource in a community-wide effort to help families grow in that understanding and awareness," he said.

Ten dioceses were found non-compliant with the U.S. bishops' requirements for abuse-prevention programs. They include the Archdiocese of Boston, where some parishes refused to teach children about inappropriate touching by adults because they felt the material was too explicit.

**Send e-mail to the author: [choney@grpress.com](mailto:choney@grpress.com)**



## Former Foster Kids Hope to Improve System

Sarah Hulett

DEARBORN, MICH. (2008-03-09) Rebecca Gremore is a stay-at-home mom trying to give her young son and daughter the kind of childhood she never had.

Gremore spent her childhood in foster care. And now that she's an adult, she's working to improve the system.

A few years ago, she helped start a foster care youth board in her home county. There are about a dozen of the boards around the state.

Gremore says there's one thing foster kids want more than anything else.

"It's no decisions about us without us," she says. "All of us youth got together, and we said this is number one right here. Don't make any choices about us without us. If you can't do what we think, we feel might be the best decision, then please explain why."

Gremore says too many people think of foster kids as troublemakers and delinquents. She says she sees it as part of her life's work to smash that stereotype, and to get the people who make decisions about foster kids to listen to what they have to say.

Gremore and her youth group have stood outside Wal-Mart to introduce themselves to the community, and arranged meetings with school administrators. This spring, she'll take a group of foster kids to meet with judges and lawyers in Livingston County to talk about the court system that's responsible for kids in foster care.

"One of the biggest complaints right now with youth is that a lot of youth - well, most of the youth - only see their lawyers like five minutes before a court hearing, or maybe a ten minute phone call," Gremore says. "And when a lawyer is supposed to represent your best wishes, how can they do that when they don't know you?"

But some foster care alumni want more than an advisory role in the child welfare system. They say real improvements in the lives of foster kids will only happen when they're helping to run that system.

"Unless we have people who are in leadership positions, that have access to resources, access to power, access to influence, an advisory board is like not having a board at all," says John Seita, a social work professor at Michigan State University who spent his childhood in foster care.

Seita says you wouldn't see the NAACP led by a white person. Or the National Organization for Women led by a man. So he says it's not OK that none of Michigan's child welfare agencies are led by former foster care kids. That was the finding of a survey Seita conducted of Michigan's private child welfare agencies a few years ago.

Misty Stenslie is on the board of the national advocacy group Foster Care Alumni of America. She agrees there need to be more former foster kids leading the organizations that take care of them. But she says getting there will take some time and patience.

"When you're first working to incorporate a new perspective, there is just a developmental process starts somewhere. And where it typically starts is with some tokenism," says Stenslie.

Becky Gremore says she feels like she's an important part of the state's effort to improve foster care.

Since she left the system, the state started a policy called Team Decision Making. It lets foster kids sit in when something major is being decided. That could be when they're about to be taken away from their family, or removed from a foster home, or reunited with their birth parents.

It also allows grandparents, teachers, counselors, and people like her to take part in those meetings. She says seeing the system from the inside has given her a new perspective.

"I'm now in turn trying to advocate for my caseworker," says Gremore. "So I try to advocate for improving the jobs of our caseworkers and improving the system on a much higher level it will help trickle down and improve the smaller levels. And that will hopefully improve the lives of the children."

This past week, a group of former foster care kids met with state lawmakers to go over the recommendations made by Michigan's foster care youth boards.

They include better efforts by the state to keep families together, and more help getting driver's licenses and financial aid.

But most of all, they say they want decisions about their lives to include them.

*Contact Sarah Hulett at [sarahhu@umich.edu](mailto:sarahhu@umich.edu)*

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## TOP STORY ■■■

FRIDAY, MARCH 07, 2008

## States adopt Missouri youth justice model

By Christine Vestal, Stateline.org Staff Writer

As states grapple with spiraling prison costs and reports of abuse in juvenile lock-ups, many are trying to recreate a successful Missouri program that boasts one of the lowest repeat-offender rates in the country.

It took a crisis, but the Show-Me State in the early 1980s abandoned its embattled youth corrections facility, which housed 650 juveniles, and switched to smaller regional treatment centers that provide education, job training and 24-hour counseling. Missouri's approach — originally pioneered in Massachusetts — aimed at creating a safe, non-punitive environment, where counselors help troubled kids turn around their lives.



Photos by Christine Vestal, Stateline.org

**Oak Hill Youth Detention Center, before and after. On left, original cell in un-renovated section. On right, cell converted to Missouri-style bedroom.**

“Everything we did was guided by a central belief: These are kids, even though they’ve committed some very adult-like behaviors. Let’s find out how they got into this, and help them get out of it and lead productive lives,” said Tim Decker, director of Missouri’s [Division of Youth Services](#).

The result of a scathing federal government report on the conditions and punishments in its juvenile lock-up, Missouri’s radical new approach was some 20 years ahead of what is becoming a national trend. In the last three years, lawmakers and other officials from at least 30 states have visited the Missouri facilities, and several are taking steps to adopt the system.

“States have begun to realize that if they can find effective methods of reforming youth offenders, they will save money, communities will be safer and kids will benefit,” said Miriam Rollin of [Fight Crime: Invest in Kids](#), an anti-crime organization made up of attorneys general and other law enforcers.

Missouri’s intensive counseling program is not necessarily cheaper than traditional lock-up programs, but with fewer than 8 percent of its graduates returning to the system, the state saves money in the long run, Decker said. “You’re not treating the same kids over and over,” he said.

Experts say it’s difficult to compare recidivism rates, because states use different methods to calculate the percentage of repeat offenders. But most states report double-digit rates, and some say more than half of kids who leave traditional facilities return within three years.

The success of the so-called Missouri model also can be measured by its participants’ higher-than-average number of job placements and high education levels and the low incidence of violence at the facilities.

According to the [National Center on Institutions and Alternatives](#), there were 110 suicides in U.S. juvenile corrections facilities between 1995 and 1999. In Missouri, no suicides have occurred in juvenile treatment centers since their inception more than 25 years ago.

Looking to repeat those results are Louisiana, New Mexico, Santa Clara County, Calif., and the District of Columbia, which have been working with the Missouri Youth Services Institute, an organization formed by Mark Steward, the state's former youth services director.

Steward, who led Missouri's transformation for 18 years, retired three years ago only to be inundated by requests from other states looking for help. "I was hoping for a little rest," Steward said, "but the phone never stopped ringing."

Alabama, Arkansas, Illinois, Maryland, New Jersey, New York and Texas have had initial discussions with the Institute about using the program, but Steward says his small staff can work with only a few states at a time.

And he cautions them that a Missouri-style transformation won't happen overnight.

Under Steward's leadership, the state made slow, steady progress for more than two decades, resulting in a system that now includes 32 residential treatment centers located across Missouri in state parks, cottages, schools and college campuses.

Instead of razor wire, jail cells and prison guards, the cozy residential centers feature dorm-style bedrooms, classrooms and activity centers with comfortable couches and games. Most buildings are not locked, no one wears a uniform and staff psychologists, teachers and social workers are unarmed.

The program was fully supported at its onset by then-Gov. John Ashcroft (R), a tough law enforcer who later became U.S. Attorney General under President George W. Bush, and conservative state Supreme Court Justice Stephen N. Limbaugh, Jr., cousin of prominent right-wing radio commentator Rush Limbaugh.

Political opposition and loss of funding killed the program in Massachusetts, which was initially successful in the early 1970s.

National experts on juvenile crime urge states to invest in this type of counseling and rehabilitation, instead of confinement and punishment, as a way to stem adult crime and incarcerations. But for the last 20 years, most states have gone in the opposite direction, said Liz Ryan, director of the [Campaign for Youth Justice](#).

A series of high-profile youth crimes in the mid-1980s spurred most states to adopt tough juvenile crime laws, which resulted in overcrowded corrections facilities, scandals over abusive and punitive treatment and corrections budgets that often surpassed the cost of public education, Ryan said.

Now, many states are loosening their harsh juvenile laws and looking for alternatives to their aging youth corrections facilities.

Louisiana — with its scandal-plagued juvenile corrections system — was the first state to launch a Missouri-style program in January 2005. But after Hurricane Katrina destroyed the state's juvenile corrections facilities in New Orleans, the system was in chaos and the program was put on a hold.

The District of Columbia was next to embrace the Missouri model and is now two years into a transition that Vincent Shiraldi, the district's Division of Youth Rehabilitation Services

director, says will take at least another year to complete.



Photo by Christine Vestal, Stateline.org

**For the past two years, the Missouri Institute's Pili Robinson has worked five days a week with Oak Hill employees to transform the facility and train teachers and counselors in Missouri's methods. Without investing in major structural changes, the new center is achieving the kind of safe, warm atmosphere that Robinson says is essential to the success of Missouri's program.**

struggles with anger management, has experienced both the old and the new Oak Hill. Locked up five times since he was 12 years old, he says this time is different. He's taken high school classes at the facility and hopes to get his graduate equivalency diploma before he leaves. For now, he's helping out in the program's administrative office.

During his earlier stays at Oak Hill, Carl said he and the other kids mostly hung out with nothing to do. "Before, I just waited to see what would happen. Nothing was organized. I never knew what I was supposed to do to get out," he said.

"Now with them giving me advice, I've grown and expanded. They help you understand your strengths and weaknesses," Carl said.

See related story:

[California Juvenile Justice Measure Reflects State Trend](#)

Shiraldi, who battled complaints that he was soft on crime and powerful opposition by prison guard labor unions, is starting to see positive results.

"We encountered internal resistance in the beginning, but that's starting to change," he said. "Now we have tremendous political support, and the community is behind us."

Steward says the D.C. project, located at Oak Hill Youth Detention Center in Laurel, Md., was a challenge. "It was the most neglected system I'd ever seen in my life. The facility stunk, there were holes in the walls and ceilings where kids passed dope. They were just doing time. It was absolutely horrible," he said.

For the past two years, the Missouri Institute's Pili Robinson has worked five days a week with Oak Hill employees to transform the facility and train teachers and counselors in Missouri's methods. Without investing in major structural changes, the new center is achieving the kind of safe, warm atmosphere that Robinson says is essential to the success of Missouri's program.

"You're telling the kids you care about them and want to help them," he said. "They won't believe you if they're scared and uncomfortable."

Carl, 17, who has bi-polar disorder and



## Elderly woman suffocates at Pine Rest

Saturday, March 08, 2008

**The Grand Rapids Press**

GAINES TOWNSHIP -- A 66-year-old woman died this week after she suffocated underneath an adjustable bed at a Pine Rest Christian Mental Health Services facility, authorities said.

Betty Seamon, 66, was accidentally killed Tuesday when she scooted underher bed and dislodged a pedal that raises and lowers the bed's height.

Kent County Medical Examiner Stephen Cohle said Seamon's cause of death was suffocation that likely occurred within minutes.

Kent County sheriff's investigators also have probed the death.

Pam Mettler, a Pine Rest spokeswoman, said care facility workers are investigating the death and cooperating with authorities.

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## THE ANN ARBOR NEWS

### Health officer ties inequality, illness

PBS show to explore socio-economic, racial disparities

Sunday, March 09, 2008

BY JO COLLINS MATHIS

#### The Ann Arbor News

The Washtenaw County Public Health Department, in partnership with the University of Michigan School of Public Health and Office of Public Health Practice, will preview the first segment of a new four-hour PBS documentary titled "Unnatural Causes: Is Inequality Making Us Sick?" to about 200 Washtenaw County community leaders on Wednesday at the Michigan Theater in Ann Arbor.

"Unnatural Causes" examines the nation's socio-economic and racial disparities in health and searches for their root causes. Reporter Jo Mathis talked about the issue with Ellen Clement, a health officer with the Washtenaw County Public Health Department.

**Q: You've said that evidence of health inequities are abundant in Washtenaw County, including disparities in infant mortality, mental health and oral health. Can you explain?**

A. We have a persistent difference in that African-American babies born in Washtenaw County are several times more likely to die than are white babies. We don't completely know why, but we have been attacking the problem with typical health interventions such as making sure that pregnant women have access to health care even if they're uninsured. Those types of interventions, along with other types of support services provided by public health and community agencies, have not been sufficient to eliminate the difference. So we need to begin to look more broadly at our community policies and identify other ways we may be able to make a difference.

**Q: Any idea what those other ways might be?**

A: People who experience high rates of infant mortality, for instance, may be affected by a whole array of community stressors that may have to do with having less education; having access to poorly paid jobs, if that; having poor housing options; having more stressful community conditions, including crime, or things related to being able to participate in community fully and having a really good quality of life.

We know that people who are affected by all those conditions actually experience chronic stress that have physical effects on the body that can affect things like birth outcomes for women.

**Q. What is the Washtenaw County Public Health Department's role in these issues?**

A. Our role is constantly striving to find ways to make a difference in these areas where certain people in our community are experiencing worse health. So we're trying to stay educated ourselves and look for new and innovative ways to attack persistent health problems. We're also interested in making sure the broader community and other community agencies and policy makers understand that their activities may really affect health outcomes, for better or worse depending on the types of decisions they make and the ways they deliver programs and services.

**Q. How can the public be involved in solving this inequality?**

A: I think also being aware and understanding things like the fact that health is more than health care, and that health is tied to these underlying challenges we have in our society, and that we really may want to be more actively engaged in making sure that as a society we make the best choices possible. It's just not acceptable for the U.S. to continue to spend more than twice per person on health care than any other industrialized country and yet our life expectancy is 29th in the world and our infant mortality is 31st in the world.

We're not getting results with the money we're spending. We're poised to spend more or make different policy decisions around access to health care, but it may not be the solution to all the health problems we're facing, and it's important we realize that. We may want to invest in some of the underlying social safety net issues that help make sure everyone is well educated; that they have access to decent jobs with living wages; that they have good housing options. Some of those basic fundamental social safety nets.

**Q: Considering Michigan's struggling economy, is this a difficult time for this discussion?**

A: It's never an easy time to discuss major social concerns. But certainly we have a lot of public attention for the importance of individual health behaviors and the way they affect an individual's health, and the importance of access to health care as a major component of making sure communities are healthy. But what we don't always look at are the way other policies and community conditions may be even more significant in keeping certain individuals from being as healthy as possible.

To coincide with the national broadcast of the documentary, screenings of the remaining three segments, followed by community dialogues, will be held at the Ann Arbor District Library's fourth floor meeting room from 6:30 to 8:30 p.m. on three consecutive Thursdays, March 20, March 27 and April 3. Post-screening discussions will allow attendees to share thoughts and ideas and will be facilitated by professional health educators from the Washtenaw County Public Health Department.

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## Michigan may be 1st state to issue food stamps twice a month

3/9/2008, 7:36 a.m. ET

By DAVID EGGERT  
The Associated Press

LANSING, Mich. (AP) — Michigan could become the first state in the nation to issue food stamps twice a month, making fresh produce and meat more available and giving grocery workers steadier hours.

The state's 1.2 million food stamp recipients — the highest number ever — now have their benefits added to a debit card within the first 10 days of the month. They then spend those dollars early in the month, typically in poorer, urban areas where residents may have limited transportation.

Each recipient gets an average \$88 a month.

Retailers say the once-a-month assistance is spent early and usually all at once, causing them problems with staffing, cash flow and inventory. Advocates for the poor say food stamp recipients aren't buying enough healthy, fresh food throughout the month.

Legislation that would require the state to issue food stamp benefits two times a month may be approved by the state Senate this week. A similar measure sponsored by Democratic Rep. Andy Meisner of Ferndale is pending in the House. Recipients who get lower amounts of assistance would still get their payments just once a month.

"I'm trying to help people help themselves," said bill sponsor Martha Scott, a Democratic senator from Highland Park. "I see people buying so much stuff the first of the month. You want to help people balance things out."

Distributing food stamps twice monthly would give shoppers more flexibility and encourage them to buy fresher foods at least twice a month, she said.

While the legislation has backing from groceries and unionized workers, not everyone thinks more frequent payments is the solution. They wonder if the problem could be fixed instead by extending the period in which money is added to debit cards from 10 days to 20 days, which would spread out the days food stamp recipients shop.

The state Department of Human Services, which is neutral on the bills, is surveying food stamp recipients to find out their preference and how a switch would affect them. Results should be ready for lawmakers in April.

DHS spokeswoman Maureen Sorbet said the agency is prepared to go to twice-monthly payments or a longer period of payments depending on survey results, legislative developments and getting approval from the federal government, which pays for food stamps. A farm bill being negotiated in Congress could prove a stumbling block, since it includes a provision that would ban states from changing food stamp distribution from once a month.

Terri Stangl, executive director of the Saginaw-based Center for Civil Justice, credited the state for conducting the survey. Some recipients have limited transportation and prefer using their money to buy in bulk for better purchasing power, she said.

"I'm not convinced that with the amount of money they're getting, they're going to buy more fresh food," Stangl said.

Scott, however, argued that issuing benefits once a month but extending the period in which they are handed out would help grocers and their employees, but not recipients.

Chris Michalakakis, lobbyist for the 50,000 Michigan members of the United Food and Commercial Workers union, said grocery employees are pushed to work extra hard in the first 10 days of the month, then see their hours cut for the rest of the month.

By distributing food stamps more equally over the month, he said, "workers will see a more even distribution of hours, as well as a greater availability of hours."

The legislative debate comes at a time when 12 percent, or more than one in nine, Michigan residents get food stamps. Eighty percent of benefits go to households with children. The number of food stamp recipients in Michigan has doubled in six years, most likely because of the weak economy.

The real issue that needs to be addressed, Stangl said, is that food stamp households are able to buy less food because assistance has been eroding each year. The federal food stamp program assumes families have enough of their own money plus food stamps to spend \$1.05 per person per meal — not enough for a health diet at today's prices, she said.

Although the federal farm bill would boost money for food stamps, the price of fresh fruits, vegetables and leaner meats is rising faster than processed foods, making it harder for families to buy the healthier items, she said.

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David Eggert can be reached at [deggert\(at\)ap.org](mailto:deggert(at)ap.org)

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The food stamp bills are House Bill 4923 and Senate Bill 120.

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On the Net:

Michigan Legislature: <http://www.legislature.mi.gov>

Michigan Department of Human Services: <http://www.michigan.gov/dhs>

United Food and Commercial Workers Local 951: <http://www.ufcw951.com>

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Article published Mar 10, 2008

Calhoun County awarded federal funds for emergency food and shelter program

Kari Marciniak

Reader Submitted

### Calhoun County Awarded Federal Funds for Emergency Food and Shelter Program

Calhoun County has been chosen to receive \$114,050 to supplement emergency food and shelter programs in the county. The selection was made by a National Board chaired by the Federal Emergency Management Agency.

A Local Board has been charged to distribute funds appropriated by Congress to help expand the capacity of food and shelter programs in high-need areas around the country. The Board, made up of representatives from local service agencies, government, ecumenical organizations, and others, will determine how the funds are to be distributed among the emergency food and shelter programs in the area.

Under the terms of the grant from the National Board, local agencies chosen to receive funds must: 1) be private voluntary non-profits or units of government, 2) have an accounting system, 3) practice nondiscrimination, 4) have demonstrated the capability to deliver emergency food and/or shelter programs, and 5) if they are a private voluntary organization, they must have a voluntary board. Qualifying agencies are urged to apply.

Agencies interested in applying for Emergency Food and Shelter Program funds must contact Kari Marciniak, Local Board Chairperson, at (269) 788-1136 or [kari@volcenterbc.org](mailto:kari@volcenterbc.org) for an application. Applications are also available at [www.uwgbc.org](http://www.uwgbc.org) or [www.volcenterbc.org](http://www.volcenterbc.org). The deadline for applications to be received is Wednesday, March 19, 2008.

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Article published Mar 10, 2008

Banking on donations

**Stephanie Antonian Rutherford**

*The Enquirer*

After a long, hard winter, supplies at the Food Bank of South Central Michigan are starting to get a bit thin, while the need continues to grow to record levels.

But spring will bring some much-needed sunshine to the non-profit, which just kicked off its annual Spring Food Raiser event — a two-month slew of fundraising events to help pump up the Food Bank's warehouse and help feed hungry people throughout the region.

"Usually these bays are quite high," Dan Salerno, the Food Bank's fund development director, said as he pointed out lowered supplies at the non-profit's Battle Creek warehouse. "With Michigan's economy doing so poorly, it's a real challenge to keep up with the level of need."

The Food Bank supplies food and essential items to more than 275 programs for people in need in eight Michigan counties. The annual Food Raiser, said executive director Bob Randels, is a huge boost that the non-profit counts on each year.

"In terms of food, the donations we receive each year through the Food Raiser count as much as what we would receive as from a Fortune 500 company," Randels said. "Literally thousands of people help."

This year's Food Raiser kicked off March 1 with the Feinstein Challenge, a program in which Rhode Island philanthropist Alan Shaw Feinstein matches donations given to the Food Bank now until April 30.

Event highlights include supermarket races, school food drives, a canned food sculpture exhibit and a special envelope insert in the Easter Sunday (March 23) edition of the Enquirer.

"It's different than the grocery bag that we've usually had as an insert," Salerno said of the Enquirer insert. "The envelope will be a great way to help the Food Bank with monetary donations."

On Friday, the Food Bank warehouse, 5451 Wayne Rd., was busy with dozens of trucks and cars pulling in to take away food.

Truck driver Josh Campbell, a community outreach coordinator for the Boys & Girls Club of Greater Kalamazoo, was loading up on snack supplies for the low-income children his organization serves in its after-school program.

"The Food Bank helps kids who normally wouldn't have access to a nutritious after-school snack," Campbell said. "We really see a difference in how the kids focus after they get the food and it makes a lot of difference in the work we do."

Raising money and donations to support programs like the Boys & Girls Club is exactly what the Food Raiser is all about, Randels said.

"It's all about neighbors helping neighbors," he said. "And it makes a big impact."

*Stephanie Antonian Rutherford can be reached at 966-0665 or [srutherford@battlecr.gannett.com](mailto:srutherford@battlecr.gannett.com).*

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# Flint-based food bank leader is focus of sexual harassment allegations

by Ron Fonger | The Flint Journal

Saturday March 08, 2008, 4:00 PM

GENESEE COUNTY -- Three women have separately sued the Flint-based Food Bank of Eastern Michigan, complaining they were sexually harassed on the job by the president of one of the area's largest nonprofit organizations.

The lawsuits in Genesee County Circuit Court claim Food Bank President William E. Kerr, 50, touched, made sexual comments, attempted to kiss and exposed himself to one or more of the women on the job.

Kerr referred questions to attorneys for himself and the Food Bank but said the lawsuits were headed "nowhere."

"There's no substance to this," Kerr said. "We believe they will proceed nowhere."

Kelly A. Kruse, an attorney whose firm represents the three women, would not comment on the cases Friday. James J. Boutrous II, an attorney for the Food Bank, also would not comment on the cases.

The first lawsuit was filed in January by Nicole Collick, who was identified as having worked as development volunteer manager for the Food Bank before being laid off from her job.

Collick's complaint claims Kerr asked her to bend over a desk, exposed himself to her, grabbed her in a sexual manner and told her not to interact with other men.

In an answer filed in Circuit Court last month, an attorney for the Food Bank and Kerr said the allegations were untrue.

Kerr and the Food Bank claimed Collick never made a report of sexual harassment while she was working "or following her separation from" the nonprofit agency.

Two other women's complaints were filed last week, both also accusing Kerr and the Food Bank of sexual harassment. None of the women still work for the nonprofit agency, Kruse said.

In one complaint, Susan Laidler claimed Kerr commented on her legs, telling her she should wear more skirts to show off her legs, and grabbed her and others in the office around the waist.

Laidler worked as the Food Bank's development manager as recently as 2005, according to Journal files.

The third lawsuit, filed by Jill Little, claimed Kerr cornered her in a room and attempted to kiss her, exposed himself to her and made "sexually suggestive comments" to her during telephone conversations.

Little's lawsuit says she worked in the nonprofit's development department. Kerr said he worried that the lawsuits could harm the Food Bank, which he called "a wonderful organization."

"We're so much a part of this community," he said.

Kerr was named chief executive officer of the Food Bank more than 13 years ago after working in the private sector and with the American Lung Association.

He is a graduate of Flint Southwestern High School and Michigan State University and has helped spearhead massive growth at the Food Bank.

The Food Bank has been one of the most successful nonprofits in the Flint area in recent years, setting annual fundraising records while other agencies struggle for money. The organization has expanded its warehouse on Lapeer Road in Flint and distributes some 19 million pounds of food a year to needy people in 22 counties.

Food Bank Vice Chairman Claude High said board members are also concerned for the agency's image.

High said an attorney hired by the Food Bank investigated sexual harassment allegations and board members believed the lawsuits would not be filed.

But High said the organization is re-examining its sexual harassment policies in the wake of the allegations because the policies were outdated.

"Bill has told us he didn't do it, and he's (been) emphatic to the board he didn't do it," High said.

The Journal could not reach Mike Cantor, chairman of the Food Bank board. Two other board members referred questions to Food Bank attorneys.



Monday, March 10, 2008

## More seek help with heating bills

### Cold winter, tough economy cause record number of residents to request funding from aid programs.

**Jennifer Youssef and Nathan Hurst / The Detroit News**

**DETROIT** -- Record numbers of Metro Detroiters are seeking help to heat their homes this winter, as cold weather drives up gas bills and a sagging economy stretches wallets thin.

A large state program has seen a 42 percent increase in people applying for heating assistance this year. The nonprofit Heating and Warmth Fund (THAW) that helps those in need pay delinquent heating bills expects to serve a record number of people. And DTE Energy and Consumers Energy, both of which have programs to help customers who are behind on their payments, also say requests for help have risen.

"More customers are falling between the cracks," said Debra Harmon, corporate customer assistance manager at Consumers Energy. "Many of them have never had trouble paying their bills before."

The surge in need is no surprise, given the toll Michigan's economic slowdown has taken on the jobs and wages of thousands of residents. The state's unemployment declined slightly from December to January, but still is the highest in the nation at 7.1 percent. And a colder winter than last year is adding to the problem by driving up monthly heating bills. Metro Detroit temperatures, on average, were colder than last year in November, December and January, according to National Weather Service data. Only February was warmer.

The State Emergency Relief Program -- administered by the Department of Human Services and funded by the federal government -- received 57,000 applications for heating assistance from October through December, according to Maureen Sorbet, spokeswoman for the department. That's an increase of 24,000 over last year, or 42 percent.

The program is for low-income residents who have had their heat shut off or are about to. The benefits are capped based on the type of fuel used. Those with electric, natural gas or wood heating systems can receive \$350 a year, while those using deliverable fuels like heating oil can receive up to \$650.

THAW, which collects cash donations that it then distributes to families with delinquent energy bills, is on pace to surpass the 8,700 households it assisted last year, which was a record, CEO John X. Miller said.

Miller said 7,840 households had received assistance as of Feb. 25, with several more weeks of winter left to go. The program, with an annual budget of about \$10 million, paid \$1.5 million in heating bills in January alone, a record for the month.

He blamed the economy and housing slowdown for the surge in clients.

"People of all income brackets are being affected by the cold, snowy winter and the escalating fuel costs," he said. "It hurts low-income people more because it takes a bigger chunk out of their budgets, but there are other people who need help as well." The average household requesting assistance owes about \$1,000, but he said some have been up to \$10,000 in arrears. He said no qualified households have been turned away and there is still more than \$3 million in this year's budget.

#### 'I'm just grateful'

Unemployed and going through a divorce, 28-year-old Tina Thomas of Detroit didn't know what to do when the gas company sent her a \$6,000 bill and the third and final shutoff notice in September. Then she found out about THAW. The agency helped pay her bill and the gas was turned back on at her four-bedroom house.

"I'm just grateful," she said of THAW. "I would have had to look for other places to get help."

David Lagstein, an organizer in Detroit for the national poverty advocacy organization ACORN, said about 10 families come to the agency each week for assistance with heating bills, a number that has steadily increased in recent years.

ACORN, the Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now, helps low-income families who have struck out with other agencies. It helps families negotiate with utility companies to make payments more affordable, and identify public and private assistance programs.

"Bills have gone up quite a bit in recent years, and it's been hurting many low-income families in the Detroit area," Lagstein said. Lagstein expects the number needing help to only increase as the housing crisis lingers and consumer prices for food and energy stay high. That means the limited supply of heating assistance will need to grow.

"We are able to help about half of the people who need it, but there's still a gap in the need and what's available to help them," Lagstein said. "One can't underestimate how serious this problem is for families."

#### Cold spell pushes bills up

This year, it wasn't higher natural gas rates that contributed to more people falling behind on their heating bills. At Consumers, natural gas rates were flat with last year, and DTE's rates actually fell.

But usage this year rose as the temperatures fell, hiking up heating bills and straining already tight household budgets.

DTE Energy spokeswoman Lorie Kessler said the utility has seen a 2.2 percent increase from last year to this year in the number of accounts that are past due. Harmon at Consumers said that on any given day, 10 percent to 12 percent of the 1.7 million Consumers Energy customers have trouble paying their bills.

Both companies offer assistance programs.

Consumers is promoting a program for customers who can't qualify for other low-income programs. Dubbed PeopleCare Plus, it's funded by donations that Consumers Energy collects and gives to the Salvation Army, which decides who gets help. This winter, the Salvation Army is distributing about \$872,000 in energy assistance.

Customers having difficulty with their payments should call DTE early, before they get a shut-off notice, spokesman John Austerberry said.

"We like to think that no matter what situation our customer is in, that there's something we can do to help them receive service throughout the winter."

*You can reach Jennifer Youssef at (313)222-2319 or [jyoussef@detnews.com](mailto:jyoussef@detnews.com).*

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## Girl Scouts collect for needy

Sunday, March 09, 2008

By Dana DeFever

[ddefever@citpat.com](mailto:ddefever@citpat.com) -- 768-4945

Saturday's cold weather may have deterred some people from coming to the Girl Scouts' donation drive, but that didn't stop the girls from having fun.

The girls at the Middle School at Parkside were giggling, running about and dressed in winter coats, gloves and hats as they waited for people to stop by.

"They like it when there's people dropping off stuff. They get really excited," said Joyce Hill, program manager for the Girl Scouts.

Saturday was the second year the Girl Scouts -- Irish Hills Council teamed with Goodwill Industries for the drive, collecting clothing and household items.

"It's everything people would normally drop off at Goodwill," said Catherine Goetz, leader of Girl Scout Troop 284.

The collection was part of a councilwide service project to mark Girl Scout Week, which starts today and continues through Saturday.

Girl Scouts Rebekka Winklepleck, 12, and Elisabeth Goetz, 11, both of Jackson, said they hoped the cold weather wouldn't scare people away.

"Last year was warmer," Rebekka said.

The girls brought in items for the drive, including clothes and stuffed animals.

The Middle School at Parkside was one of several drop-off sites Saturday.

Jim Snyder, Goodwill plant manager, said some of the locations, such as Hutch's Food Center in Spring Arbor, were busy.

"They were getting hit pretty hard," he said.

Last year, nearly 17,000 pounds of donations were collected, earning the council Community Donor of the Year honors from Goodwill Industries of Central Michigan.

Snyder said he estimates Saturday's drive collected about the same amount as last year's collection, but he won't have a number until Monday.

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